BOOKS

Sinister Conspiracy?

THE SEARCH FOR AMELIA EARHART, by Fred Goerner. 326 pages. Doubleday. $5.95.

Was Amelia Earhart really lost at sea during her round-the-world flight 29 years ago—or was she a spy who died a captive of the Japanese?

Fred Goerner, a San Francisco radio newscaster, pursued the question for six years, and has caught up with what he is convinced is the answer. Obviously, if Earhart simply died in a plane accident, there would be no need for a book. By stitching surmise to fact, Goerner makes a book that barely hangs together. His tantalizing if familiar theory is that Earhart and her navigator, Fred Noonan, were on an unofficial spy mission for the U.S. when they crashed and fell into Japanese hands.

No Luck. As far as the public knows, Earhart and Noonan left Lae, New Guinea, on July 1, 1937, on the most dangerous leg of their trip—a 2,550-mile leap to tiny (one square mile) Howland Island, where no plane had ever landed before. Early on July 2, the Coast Guard cutter *Itasca*, standing by at Howland, received a series of messages from Pilot Earhart reporting that she was unsure of her position and that she was running low on gas. Her last message, delivered in a broken and choked voice, was a plea for a fix on her position. Too late. *Itasca* failed to get a fix, and so, subsequently, did an armada of U.S. fleet searchers.

Goerner has succeeded, he says, where the U.S. Navy failed. Financed by CBS, the Scripps newspaper chain, the San Mateo (Calif.) Times and the Associated Press, he made four trips to the islands of the western Pacific to gather evidence of evil-doing. In 1960, he returned from the Pacific with a bagful of airplane parts dredged out of Saipan harbor. These, he believed, were the remains of Earhart's twin-engined Lockheed Electra.* No such luck; the collection turned out to be parts from a Japanese plane. In 1964, Goerner got a flash of headlines by producing seven pounds of human bones and 37 teeth. The flyers? Nope, declared a Berkeley anthropologist—they belonged to some late Micronesians.

Detour. At length, after scores of interviews with witnesses who claimed that they knew something, and with various officials who denied that they knew anything, Goerner fashioned his plot. When Earhart left Lae, he writes, she did not fly directly toward Howland Island. Instead, acting on the request of a highly placed U.S. official (Goerner hints that it must have been F.D.R.), she headed north toward Truk in the central Carolines to reconnoiter Japanese airfields and fleet-servicing facilities in the area. To make this detour possible without arousing suspicion—after all, the whole world knew the flyer's itinerary—Earhart had had her Electra secretly outfitted with special engines capable of cruising at 200 m.p.h.; as far as anybody else knew, Goerner writes, the plane could do only 150-165 m.p.h.

After sizing up Truk, Earhart headed for Howland. Goerner guesses that she soon got hopelessly lost in a tropical storm and turned the Electra north and west, away from her destination. By calculating the Electra's speed and fuel consumption, Goerner figures that the plane must have crash-landed near the beach of Mili atoll in the southeastern Marshall Islands. It was from that place, he says, that Earhart cranked out S O S messages on the plane's emergency radio. This, Goerner believes, accounts for the fact that a number of radio operators reported picking up messages from the downed plane at about this time.

Goerner estimates that twelve days later a Japanese fishing boat reached the couple. They were taken aboard and later transferred either to the Japanese seaplane tender *Kamoi* or to the survey ship *Koshu*, which was known to be in the region. From his talks with natives, Goerner concludes that the flyers were taken first to Jaluit, then Kwajalein, and finally to Saipan, Japan's military headquarters in the Pacific; a number of Saipanese say that they saw

GOERNER WITH "PLANE PART" IN SAIPAN
A tantalizing theory.

a man and a woman who resembled Noonan and Earhart. Goerner quotes native sources as saying that Earhart probably died of dysentery and that Noonan was beheaded, but he does not document the fact. Nevertheless he writes: "The kind of questioning and hardships they endured can be imagined. Death may have been a release they both desired."

No Secret. If Goerner's story is correct, why is it that neither the U.S. nor the Japanese government will confirm it? That is what he wants to know. There is a sinister conspiracy in Washington, Goerner hints, aimed at keeping things hushed up, even so many years after the event. And the Japanese won't talk, he adds, because they fear that an admission of complicity would damage their hopes of recovering some of the Pacific islands that became part of a U.N. trust territory after the war. That farfetched notion will be news to the Japanese.

Along the way, Goerner does infect the reader with some nagging points. He has found two U.S. Marines who claim that they exhumed the flyers' bodies in Saipan in 1944, and says that the remains were either secretly reinterred or are today in the possession of the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology. And he quotes no less a personage than Admiral Chester A. Nimitz, who told Goerner in March 1965: "I want to tell you Earhart and her navigator did go down in the Marshalls and were picked up by the Japanese." Alas, Nimitz told him no more than that; he died last February.

Readers who take Goerner's word for everything will have to take it on faith. For example, those special engines that play such an important part in Goerner's closely cut puzzler were no secret at all. On the day after Earhart's plane went down, the New York Times reported that the Electra was equipped with two of the latest Wasp engines, capable of cruising speeds well over 200 m.p.h.

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EARHART & NOONAN BEFORE TAKEOFF (1937)
A choked voice.

* Today's four-engine Lockheed Electra is an altogether different model, related by name only.